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INFORMATION ON CZECHOSLOVAK URANIUM PLANT IN NEJDEK

[Comment: This report is based on Radio Free Europe. Item No 10391/55, dated 30 November 1955. The source of the information is a 30-year old refugee who escaped in late August 1955, and who is a former employee of the uranium plant. The date of observation is August 1955.]

Uranium Plant in Nejdek

The plant for processing uranium ore is located in a 400 x 500 meter fenced area near the Vysoka Pec Railway Station in close proximity to Nejdek. The official name of the enterprise is Jachymov Mines, national enterprise, 9th Inspectorate (Jachymovske doly, narodni podnik, IX inspektorat), Nejdek. This is a military enterprise in which stringent security measures prevail. The enterprise is surrounded by a double barbed-wire fence, with a 2-meter space between the fences. Some five or six wooden towers manned by military guards are located around the plant. Beside the fence, in the direction of the plant canteen which is located near the forest outside the fenced area, a signboard reads: "Entry and passage permitted only without stopping." Source claims that guards are permitted to use their weapons against any suspicious persons who fail to abide by this warning. The soldier guards, 50-60 in number, are housed in a wooden barracks, outside the plant area, which is also behind a special wire fence.

The plant uses a complex method of processing the uranium ore or radioactive material graded at, and brought from, the grading plant in Vikmanov. The two final products are either in liquid or powder form. Both products are shipped to an unknown destination. The powdered product is most likely flown directly to the USSR.

The factory employs some 900 persons, of whom some 30 percent are women. Decisions are in the hands of Russians, of whom there are about 40 at the plant, all occupying key positions. They are in the factory laboratory, which is a two-story villa near the main factory building. They likewise serve as sector chiefs of individual factory divisions. In these positions they work with, or rather dictate to, Czech supervisory personnel. The Russian decisions always stand, and even when ignorance is evident, no one, including Jaromir Pribyl, the Czech director of the factory, can change them. Pribyl is a 45-year-old Communist of working-class origin who managed to secure his position of leadership only through his loyalty to the Communist Party. Since he wears a moustache, none of the employees refer to him by any name other than "the bearded one." The workers consider him a slave-driver and extortioner who uses every opportunity to take stringent measures against the employees in order to get the greatest performance for the least amount of money. For these reasons, general dissatisfaction prevails in the factory.

Security Measures

Just as in every important national enterprise, passes are required to enter the plant, source pointed out. He had the following document for entry into the plant:

Temporary Pass

No

For.....Date of birth.....
who is permitted to enter Mine Inspectorate IX for the purpose of
performing his duties.

This permit is valid from 8 July to 8 September 1955.

Upon receipt of a [permanent?] pass, this temporary pass must
be returned.

Stamp: Recruiting center
Ostrov u Karlovych Varu

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This document authorized source to enter the plant and to remain only in his section and in those sections to which entry was not forbidden. Employees were not permitted to enter the following work areas [without special permits]:

1. The laboratory in the villa, into which no Czechoslovak employees could gain entrance, and for whose entry no permits were issued.
2. Section 2 A, which contained tanks and boilers for the solution of crushed ore.
3. Section 3, in which the filtration presses operated.
4. Section 4, which contained the so-called "ultrafilters" [press filters], which turned out the final powdered product.
5. The main conveyer belt section (transportni pas) [by means of which] graded uranium ore was transported to the crushers through an underground passage.

Entry to these sections was forbidden because an observant visitor could learn the details of the quality of the ore being brought in and information on the basic chemical processing of the ore. Any undue curiosity or carelessness created suspicion of espionage or sabotage.

Production Process

The ore came to the plant from the grading plant at Vikmanov by means of a railway spur which came inside the wire fence of the plant. Twice daily, some 8 to 10 freight cars arrive loaded with ore to a height of about 3/4 of a meter. The ore is unloaded on steel or iron belts by means of which it is transported to so-called bunkers, which lead underground and feed onto rubber conveyers, which then convey the ore to the main conveyer belt, past the shaker, and to three ball mills. The ore comes out ground to a powder, passes on to vacuum chambers (odsavaci komory), where it is diluted with water (or another chemical liquid). It then goes to the so-called boiler room where after addition of various chemicals, it is heated to a certain temperature. It is said among the workers that heavy water is added to the solution. The addition of the chemicals and the entire chemical production process is directed by Russian specialists. From the boiler room, the liquid goes to the coarse filtration presses (26 of them) and then to the fine press filters, whose canvases trap a thin film of light-brown mud which is then scraped off and hauled to the warehouse in metal carts. The ground ore in solution passes through the above filtering process two or three times. The final products are then a liquid, saturated with radioactivity and a sticky slime from the press filters. The slime turns into powder, after evaporation. The waste from the coarse presses is then hauled to the dump.

By Plane to the USSR?

The liquid product is then piped into railway tank cars at the factory railway spur and is transported to an unknown destination. The transportation of the solid product is different. Source believes, on the basis of all indications, that it is transported by plane directly to the USSR. His conclusion is based upon the following circumstances:

In the warehouse, the radioactive powder is packed into wooden kegs measuring about 60 x 50 x 50 centimeters which have iron bands and a lock. The powder is placed into metal tubs within the kegs. The tubs are equipped with lids. After the keg is filled it is closed and locked by the Russian supervisor,

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who sticks a red label on it and signs his name on the label. Thus packed, the radioactive material is loaded on 8-ton trucks and hauled to the airfield near Ostrov near Karlovy Vary. As many as three trucks make this trip daily. Once or twice daily, Russian "Il-12" aircraft leave the airfield. Since the Ostrov Airfield is not situated on any air route, and is not on any flight schedule, source believes that the transportation of radioactive material from the Nejdek plant and the flights are related.

As far as the Ostrov Airfield is concerned, source believes that it was only recently widened (within the past 12-18 months). Prior to that time (1953) it was not possible to land aircraft of the "Ilyushin" type on this airfield. Now this is possible, and source actually observed the aircraft.

Russians Are Unrestricted Bosses

The Russian "specialists" are unrestricted bosses in the enterprise. The employees must carry out their wishes and orders without question, even if they may be completely absurd. The Czech director may change their orders only with their consent. Under these conditions, the following scenes take place:

One day in July 1953, Kalinich (FNU), the Russian chief of the filtration press section, discovered that the cloth filter in one of the presses was not precisely in place and that the liquid was getting into the presses. The workers defended themselves on the grounds that if they were to fulfill their norms, they could not check on the presses which, after all, was the responsibility of the preceding shift. Kalinich, without giving the matter much consideration, ordered silon cloth filters which are used only on the fine press filters to be substituted for the old canvas filters. Despite the fact that the press operators cautioned Kalinich of this fact, they had to carry out the order and at the same time tolerate his abusive derisions. The replacement of the filters required 8 hours. After two additional hours of operation, work had to stop because the presses became packed with slime which would not pass through the heavy filters, but settled on them. After steps were taken by Václav Kopecký, the Czech supervisor, Kalinich ordered replacement of new filters with the old. Two additional hours were lost. The shift carried out only 42 percent of the day's (norm) and forfeited the so-called progressive norm which is paid when the sector plan is carried out smoothly. Pointing out Kalinich's error was to no avail.

In mid August, the plumbing which led along the roof to the pump of a tank in boiler room No 2 was being repaired. Kalinich ordered the opening of the other pump which, however, for the duration of the repairs, was connected to the other tank which was (at the time) forming. The worker who was ordered to perform this task, refused and pointed out that something might happen since the plumbing on the roof was open for repairs. Kalinich yelled at the worker and repeated his orders, so the worker opened the pump. The result was that the liquid from the tank was forced out on the roof by the pressure, and before the pump could be stopped again, damages amounted to 50,000 crowns were incurred. The most interesting thing was that in the course of the investigation, the enterprise laid the blame on the repairmen who were supposedly responsible for reporting that the plumbing was open. After the true cause of the damage was determined, the case was hushed up, even though any person other than Kalinich would have been charged with sabotage.

The Russian "specialists" in the Nejdek Plant are paid royally. They net about 8,000 crowns (monthly). Of this, some 5,000 is their basic salary and the remainder is payment for quarters and for being away from home. They live in Karlovy Vary and ride to and from work on a special bus. The situation is quite different in the case of native workers. Their earnings are reduced wherever possible.

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Working Conditions

The plant management, under the leadership of Director Jaromir Pribyl, strives to reduce wages and to raise norms. Whenever their own finances are involved however, these principles are not applied. An interesting wage policy exists in the plant. When, on about the 25th of the month, it is evident that the plan will not be fulfilled 100 percent and consequently collective bonuses, which are shared by the administrative personnel and even the director and the Russians, will not be paid, production is rushed in order to achieve 100 percent fulfillment without regard for the quality of the work. No attention is devoted to whether active [radioactive] material is left in the waste, nor are the samples from the presses tested. Attention is devoted only to quantity. When it is evident that the plan will be fulfilled, the workers are rushed in order that their work will be of low quality, and so they will forfeit the progressive bonuses for over-all production and so that the established norms can be set at the highest level. The interferences with the worker's earnings are tantamount to robbery. A typical case occurred near the end of July 1955.

The employees of the press-shop fulfilled their plans 135 percent in July; this would entitle them to approximately 1,000 crowns [per worker] in gross compensation. The director and the economist felt that this was too much money. Therefore, Pribyl ordered a "retroactive increase in the norms" for July which resulted in a 16-percent reduction in the compensation. When this drastic measure was announced, the press operators stopped work. One shift of workers was involved. Soon, two automobiles and a small bus carrying members of the State Security Police (Statni bezpecnost) arrived, apparently from Karlovy Vary. The State Security Police took 10 or 15 of the most obstreperous workers away, everyone of whom returned to work in 3 days. On the same day, the director asked the employees to send two representatives from each section to his office to negotiate the setting of norms. At the meeting, Director Pribyl maintained that not enough ore had been put into production to permit the plan to be fulfilled 135 percent during the specified period, and therefore he had had to reduce the pay. [The workers were told that] in the future, the norms are to be set according to the press-shop and apply to other sections as well, because production in all sections is related. After this meeting, the workers gave their answer in a quiet slowing-down of work. They did this two or three times and then ended the practice, because the plant management demanded that the work cycle be fulfilled, even if it had to be done on overtime without compensation. On one occasion, overtime work was required. Since that time, the workers fulfilled the cycle regularly at the reduced wage and according to the new, increased norms.

Higher Earnings in Bohemia

Of the 400 employees at the plant, some 40 percent are Slovaks who came to Nejdek for the higher wages, which they could not earn in Slovakia. It is generally known that earnings in Slovakia are 20 percent lower than in Bohemia and Moravia. Source personally has the same experience. As a blaster in the mines at Handlov he earned a gross of 1,000 to 1,100 crowns monthly, while at the same job in Serechov and as a press operator at Nejdek he was able to earn 1,200 to 1,300 crowns monthly. The gross of 1,200 to 1,300 crowns was also the average earning at the Nejdek plant. Source explains the presence of the Slovak workers in the Nejdek plant on the basis of another condition. That is, that some 40 percent of the plant's employees refused to pay dues to the ROH [Revolucni odborove hnuti, Revolutionary Trade Union Movement] and regarded this organization as completely useless. They came to Bohemia to work in order to earn more, and cared about nothing else. The workers adopted a similar attitude toward the KSC organization in the plant which comprises about 20 percent of the entire labor force [of the Nejdek plant].

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Neglect of Worker's Health Conditions

According to health regulations, the plant's workers were to be protected from radiation by rubber suits, boots, aprons, and goggles. The workers had this equipment in 1952, but in 1955 they work only in shorts, a cloth waist apron, and rubber boots.

If some one became ill as a result of the lack of [red blood] corpuscles, the plant physician would send him to the hospital for 6 weeks, and in more serious cases, for 9 weeks. When the danger was past, the plant would assign the individual to a healthier place with lighter tasks, where he earned less. In this manner the case would be closed.

Czechoslovakia is supposed to have four additional uranium processing plants similar to that at Nejdek. It is said that the Nejdek plant is capable of processing the production of three or four average-sized uranium mines.

(RFE Comment: Source worked at the Nejdek plant from the beginning of June to 24 August 1955. He explains his knowledge of the facts by stating that, as a result of the manpower shortage, the press operators always worked the presses 5 days each week, and on the sixth day they worked wherever they were needed.)

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